

## **Four Trends That May Portend the Future for ATS Enrollment: What the Last Decade Says about the Next Decade**

by

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*“Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”* Amidst our ever-changing times, those are encouraging words. They are attributed to Corrie ten Boom (1892-1982), author of *The Hiding Place*. She knew something about uncertainty as a Dutch Christian who harbored more than a hundred Jews during WWII. While our seminaries are certainly not experiencing the horrific changes of the Holocaust, we are collectively facing something of an “unknown future.” This article highlights four enrollment trends among ATS seminaries that may portend that unknown future, plus a few more focused on the future of the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree. *Portend* itself is an interesting word. It can mean a sign of something momentous or a warning of something calamitous. We hope the former is our future.

To set the stage for these four trends, consider this: 10 years ago the “typical” ATS seminarian was a white male in his 20s pursuing an MDiv on campus. Ten years from now the “typical” ATS seminarian will likely be a person of color in his (still male) 30s or 50s pursuing an MA off-campus or online. Other than gender, our students a decade from now will not likely look like our students from a decade ago—if enrollment trends over the last decade continue (based on enrollment data reported each fall by the 270+ ATS member schools; see ATS Annual Data Tables under “Resources” on the ATS website). This article will briefly explore four of those trends and a few more focused on the DMin. It should be noted that the overall enrollment trend among seminary enrollment is downward. In fact, since 2006, total ATS enrollment has declined 11% (from 81,180 to 72,116), though last year’s enrollment showed a small increase—the first increase in ten years not due to adding new member schools. This decline mirrors a recent downward trend among many other graduate school professions (see [Are master’s degrees on their way out? Alternatives grow as enrollment fades](#) in April 13, 2015, *Washington Post*). Yet this overall decline masks some important trends that are worth noting for ATS seminary enrollments, since some segments are growing.

### **Trend #1: From younger students to older seminarians**

A decade ago, the largest age demographic among ATS seminaries was under 30, constituting nearly a third of all seminarians. Since then, the 20-somethings age group has declined 12% (from 24,659 to 21,589). By contrast, over the last decade seminarians aged 50 and older have increased by nearly 6% (from 14,919 to 15,739). Current enrollment trends indicate that 50+s may surpass 20-somethings by 2020. The 30s age group has also grown over the last decade by more than 3% (from 18,724 to 19,311). The only age group other than the 20s that has not increased over the last decade are those in their 40s (down 21%, from 17,723 to 14,043). These data do not suggest any clear conclusions or certainly any clear causes, but still the overall trend is toward older seminarians. Part of that may be due to the economy since the 2008 recession. Part of that may also be due to the rapid increase in older undergraduate students during the last decade. And part of that may be due to seminaries making their programs increasingly more accessible through online and offsite programs (see Trend #4 below), which is more manageable

for older students with family and career commitments who no longer need to relocate to attend seminary.

### **Trend #2: From white students to seminarians of color**

A decade ago, white students from North America constituted 67% of all ATS seminarians who reported their race/ethnicity. This past year, persons of color and students from outside North America constituted 40% of all ATS seminarians who reported their race/ethnicity. In actual numbers, that is nearly a *10% increase* in persons of color and international students and nearly a *20% decrease* in Caucasian students in just ten years. If those enrollment trends continue, by 2025 (less than a decade from now), international and minority students will be a majority among ATS seminaries—well ahead of the 2040 date often projected for the US population. Currently, 25% of all ATS member schools already have a majority minority enrollment. And among the 150 ATS schools with DMin programs, the majority of DMin enrollees have been minority students since 2012. The fastest-growing groups among all seminarians over the last decade have been Hispanic students (up 361%, from 938 to 4,325) and Asian students (up 247%, from 1,585 to 5,504), exceeded only by international students (up 400%, from 1,326 to 6,638). Black students still constitute the single largest minority enrollment, but their increase is slower than other groups (up 124%, from 4,016 to 8,991) and has even declined the last few years.

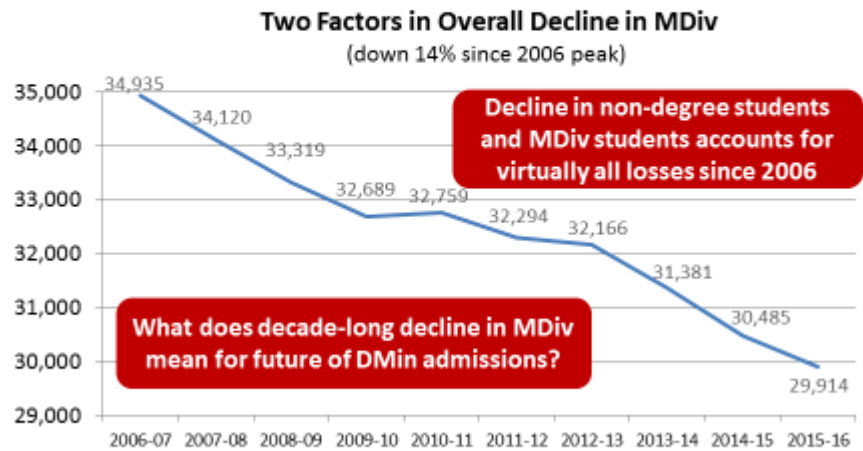
### **Trend #3: From MDiv seminarians to MA students**

A decade ago, 44% of all seminarians were pursuing the MDiv degree, which amounted to 34,935 students. This past year, that number had *declined by 14%* to 29,914—the first time MDiv enrollment has been below 30,000 since 1999. By contrast, this past year MA enrollments had climbed to 22,066—an *increase of 12%* since the low of 19,668 in 2011, only five years ago. At current trends, combined professional and academic MA enrollments could surpass MDiv enrollment by 2022—less than a decade from now. That would be the first time in the one-hundred-year history of ATS that we would have more MA than MDiv students. In fact, the professional MA (which now constitutes 54% of all MAs) was not even recognized in the ATS Commission Standards until 1972, at which time the BD became the MDiv and the DMin was added. Why this move from the MDiv to the MA? These data are subject to various interpretations, but here are four possible factors.

First, the academic MA had been on a significant decline and the professional MA had been on a slight decline—until the Standards were revised in 2012. That revision allowed the academic MA to be offered fully online without any special approval (other than for comprehensive distance education) and reduced the residency requirement for the professional MA, including allowing an exception for no residency. Since then, enrollment in those two MA degree categories has *increased by 12%*, while MDiv enrollment has *declined by 7%* in the same four-year time period. Second, the ATS membership includes an increasing number of schools whose constituencies do not require the MDiv for ordination. Those schools are typically evangelical Protestant, which have grown from 66 to 125 ATS member schools in the last decade—almost double. Third, the two-year professional MA is the only degree that enrolls more women than men at ATS schools: 55% vs. about 33% for all other degree programs on average. Gender may also be a factor in the growth of the professional MA. Fourth, a two-year MA degree is more affordable (and achievable) than a three-year MDiv, especially since the ATS average time to complete an MDiv is actually more than four years. The cost (and time) factor may have become

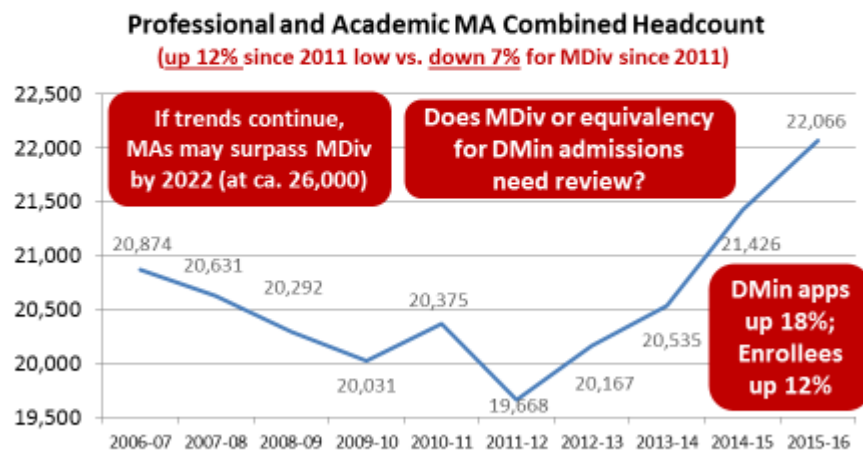
especially consequential since the 2008 recession. Last year, for example, 61% of MDiv graduates reported that they left with some educational debt incurred while in seminary, of whom half owed more than \$40,000. By contrast, only 54% of professional MA graduates reported that they left with some educational debt while in seminary, of whom less than a fifth owed more than \$40,000.

## ATS Enrollment Ten-Year Trends: MDiv



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## ATS Enrollment Ten-Year Trends: MA Degrees



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#### **Trend #4: From on-campus seminarians to online (and offsite?) students**

A decade ago, more than 80% of ATS students studied on campus, though an increasing percentage of them were commuters, not residents. Now nearly half (44%) of all ATS students are studying online or offsite. Based on recent trends, within four years (less than half a decade), ATS schools could collectively have more students studying online and/or offsite than studying on-campus, especially more studying online. Offsite enrollment among ATS extension sites actually peaked at 15,000 in 2012—just as the new Standards were being revised to permit more online learning. Since then, the number of offsite students has decreased by half to about 7,500 or the same as in 2005. Much of that decline is due to the increased popularity of online education, though in reality the lines are often blurred between the two. Extension sites that once offered everything in person on location are increasingly combining online and offsite models through hybrid approaches.

If one considers only online enrollment, however, the growth trend is overwhelming. The number of seminarians taking at least one course online has increased by almost half (45%) since 2012 (from around 16,900 to around 24,600). To be sure, the numbers reported by member schools for offsite and online enrollments are sometimes not as reliable as for onsite enrollments because of the nature of those non-traditional models. For example, online and even offsite offerings often have more frequent start times, more modular schedules, and morph into hybrid programs that combine various forms of onsite, offsite, and online enrollments. Still, the overall trend seems to be fairly clear and convincing: online education is becoming more dominant among ATS member schools. As one example, a decade ago only 60 ATS schools reported online offerings, while today more than 160 do—a 2.67-fold increase. Ten years ago those 60 schools represented less than a fourth of the ATS membership. Today's 160 schools with online offerings represent more than 60% of the membership. What was once a minority model has become an educational model used by a majority of ATS schools.

#### **Other trends to consider for DMin programs?**

As noted at the outset, over the last decade total ATS enrollment has declined 11%—from 81,180 to 72,116. However, virtually all of that decline can be accounted for by just two factors: (1) the decline in MDiv enrollment (which accounts for roughly half of the overall loss in students), and (2) the decline in non-degree program enrollment (which accounts for roughly the other half of the overall loss in students).

Regarding factor (1), the steady decline in MDiv enrollment over the last decade will undoubtedly impact DMin enrollments in the coming years. In fact, it probably already has. DMin enrollment actually peaked in 2012 at 9,316 (up 2% since 9,151 in 2006), but since then has declined more than 4% (to 8,924). The more encouraging news is that DMin applications were actually up 18% last year, and new DMin students were up 12%. Some of the overall DMin enrollment decline is likely due to the eventual impact of the decrease in MDiv enrollment, though almost half of the 150 ATS schools with DMin programs actually grew this past year. Some of that growth may be due to more attention to MDiv equivalency and to greater use of online delivery. The ATS Board of Commissioners, for example, recently approved two schools to offer their DMin programs completely online. And two of the 18 ATS peer groups in the Lilly-funded [Educational Models and Practices Project](#) are looking at DMin issues, including MDiv equivalency. Another component may be the growing number of women in DMin

programs, up 13% since 2006 compared to a 6% decline in DMin men. Women now account for 21% of all DMin enrollments. And of the three main ecclesial families, only evangelical schools show an overall increase in DMin enrollment, up 7% since 2006, while mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic DMin enrollments are down 17% and 15% respectively. Evangelicals now account for 70% of all DMin students.

Regarding factor (2) about the decline in non-degree students, since the 2008 recession the number of seminarians completing an ATS degree has actually increased by 3%. So, another interesting trend is that despite an overall decline in total enrollment, the actual number of seminarians graduating is up. On the other hand, the graduation rate for DMin students is only 55%, compared to 67% for the MDiv, though the placement rate for DMin graduates is more than 95% since most of them come already placed.

### **Conclusion**

*“Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”* None of us knows the future for any of us. The trends discussed here may hold great promise, or they may not materialize as other changes supersede them. No one knows. Still, if the past decade is any indication of the next decade, our future ten years from now may look considerably different than our history just ten years ago. What a difference a decade can make.